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Chair

Mr. Tom Lukiwski

Standing Committee on Government Operations and Estimates

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● (1100)

[*English*]

The Chair (Mr. Tom Lukiwski (Moose Jaw—Lake Centre—Lanigan, CPC)): Colleagues, even though it's a couple of minutes before 11 a.m., our scheduled start time, I'll convene the meeting now. I have a couple of housekeeping notes to go over with you before we begin.

We have with us today representatives from both the Public Service Commission and the Canadian Transportation Accident Investigation and Safety Board, as per our norm, to discuss the main estimates and departmental reports. They will be with us for the first hour. In the second hour, we will have an informal meeting with a delegation from France's Senate finance committee.

However, in between those two meetings, I would like to have about a 15-minute in camera committee business discussion with you on a couple of quick items of some urgency. One is to deal with a possible trip this committee may want to take to Shared Services Canada. We need a budget for that, and the budget has to be in by Friday, so we have to deal with that. Plus, there is a draft letter that may or may not be sent on behalf of the committee.

I will be dismissing our witnesses at about five to noon today, and then the French delegation will come in at about 10 after 12, for a 50-minute discussion. In that 15 minutes, we'll try to take care of all of our committee business.

What that means, however, is that after we have our opening statements from Monsieur Borbey and Madame Fox, it will leave us approximately 40 to 45 minutes for committee business, questions, and interventions, which will mean we won't be able to get the entire rotation of questions in. But we should be able to get in the first full round of seven-minute interventions, and at least two five-minute interventions second to that.

That's how I plan to approach this, if that's all right with everyone.

Mr. Kelly McCauley (Edmonton West, CPC): Should we skip opening remarks since we're short on time?

The Chair: I know the opening remarks are going to be somewhat truncated for both. They're going to be very brief. We'll see where we go from there.

Mr. Borbey, if you have no opening remarks, that's fine.

Madame Fox, it's certainly up to you.

Ms. Kathleen Fox (Chair, Canadian Transportation Accident Investigation and Safety Board): They're very short.

The Chair: With that, we will commence, then.

Monsieur Borbey, do you have any remarks?

Mr. Patrick Borbey (President, Public Service Commission): I will just say that I have already distributed them in advance. You have them before you. If you want to save some time, I'll forgo my opening remarks.

The Chair: Excellent. Thank you very much.

Madame Fox.

Ms. Kathleen Fox: Good morning.

Mr. Chair, honourable members, thank you for inviting the Transportation Safety Board of Canada to appear today.

I have two colleagues with me. Monsieur Jean Laporte is our Chief Operating Officer.

[*Translation*]

I am also accompanied by Luc Cassault, our Director General and Chief Financial Officer.

Given that the TSB appeared before this committee in November 2017, I believe that members of the committee are familiar with the TSB and its mandate. I will therefore proceed directly to the reason of our presence before this committee today — that is the 2018-19 Main Estimates and the 2018-19 Departmental Plan.

[*English*]

The 2018-19 main estimates show TSB appropriations of approximately $27 million and statutory contributions to employee benefits of $3 million, for a total of about $30.2 million. Compared with the previous year's main estimates, the TSB's authorities increased by about $800,000 due to adjustments for salary increases as per the collective agreements and the associated amounts for contributions to employee benefit plans.

Before moving to the departmental plan, please allow me to share a few performance highlights for the fiscal year we have just completed. I am pleased to inform you that we have made significant progress on the backlog of old investigations and we are now just about caught up. In 2017-18 we published an increased number of investigation reports compared with the previous two years while also improving the overall timeliness of our reports. Significant progress was also made on the implementation of our safety recommendations. Overall, although our performance targets were not fully achieved, clear and measurable progress was made in a number of areas. More details on our performance results will be tabled in our annual report to Parliament in June as well as our departmental results report.

[*Translation*]

Building upon the work accomplished over the past year, our 2018-19 Departmental Plan lays out our plans and priorities for the year ahead.

I would like to highlight just a few key items.

[*English*]

In a few weeks, we will proceed with the implementation of a number of concrete changes aimed at modernizing the way we conduct our business in light of changing expectations of Canadians. We will be rolling out a suite of new policies, revised business processes, and updated products. For instance, our new policy on occurrence classification will help us better prioritize, track, and report on transportation occurrences. For simpler and smaller occurrences, we will produce a new, short, limited-scope, factual-only report that will enable us to share safety information faster and more effectively. We will also launch a new, more user-friendly website, fully compliant with the latest Government of Canada standards, fully accessible from mobile devices, and including expanded contents.

[*Translation*]

We believe that these changes will help us make further progress towards the achievement of our performance targets. However, we won't stop there. We plan to continue our modernization initiatives, while also improving our interaction with indigenous peoples, and sustaining our efforts to provide our employees with a positive work environment.

[*English*]

Once again, we have an ambitious agenda, but we have a strong track record when it comes to adapting to change and getting things done.

Again, thank you for inviting us to be here today. We'd be happy to take your questions.

The Chair: Thank you, Madam Fox and Mr. Borbey, for the economy of words both of you exhibited.

We'll start now with our seven-minute interventions with Mr. Ayoub.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Ramez Ayoub (Thérèse-De Blainville, Lib.): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I would like to thank all five of you for being here once again.

I'll start with you, Mr. Borbey, from the Public Service Commission.

During its appearance on November 23, the commission informed the committee that certain hiring systems were obsolete. The commission examined the possibility of creating a prototype, and, to that end, led consultations with candidates to improve and perfect this process.

Can you tell us a bit more about the progress made since then? What next steps do you have planned? What difficulties did you run into while implementing and improving this process?

Mr. Patrick Borbey: Thank you for your question.

We have almost finished our consultations on the design of prototypes. We started by consulting with candidates, then we consulted with hiring managers. We very recently consulted with human resources professionals. We are in the process of consolidating all the information we've received with the prototypes we designed.

We will now move on to the next step, which will consist in defining the project to renew our recruitment platform, which is used by all of the public service. We are consulting with our colleagues from the Treasury Board Secretariat to find out how to comply with the standards as we develop such a project. In the following months, we will be able to seek the necessary authorities. Then, we will see which systems are already on the market and wouldn't need to be adapted too much to our needs, which were identified during our consultations.

We are at this step. This project could be relatively time-consuming, and we want to manage it well to stay on budget.

● (1105)

Mr. Ramez Ayoub: We are no longer in 2017, and we are well into 2018. What deadline have you set for finishing these steps?

Mr. Patrick Borbey: We hope that, a year from now, we will have the necessary authorities to move to the project development step and examine the systems that are already on the market.

Mr. Ramez Ayoub: All right.

What difficulties do you think you will face going from the current system to the new one? What will be the benefits of the new system? Which problems will it allow you to solve?

Mr. Patrick Borbey: Clearly, the expectations are quite high. One of our challenges is to find to a way to meet them.

We don't only have one system that needs to be replaced. We currently have many systems that don't communicate well with each other. For example, the system that programs second-language tests is separate from the recruitment system. There is also the priority management system. The hiring managers must first check for priorities in that system. It is another separate system.

We must therefore be sure that all of these systems will not only be able to work together, but also to meet the needs of the candidates and the hiring managers. Clearly, this will be a challenge.

Mr. Ramez Ayoub: At the outset, we had expressed the will to make this change—

[*English*]

The Chair: The fire alarm is ringing, therefore the meeting is suspended.

● ——————————— (Pause) ———————————

●

● (1200)

The Chair: I believe we have quorum, so we will reconvene. Unfortunately, because of the interruption, not the doing of anyone in this room, we will have a very truncated meeting. At this point in time I want to thank our witnesses who agreed to stick around for a little while longer.

Colleagues, my suggestion is that we will go through one complete seven-minute round of interventions, and then we will be able to dismiss our witnesses.

In terms of the committee business, some of our members will not be able to be here on Thursday, so I would like to deal with the committee business today if that's possible, and that will take about 15 minutes.

Mr. Kyle Peterson (Newmarket—Aurora, Lib.): What about the French delegation?

The Chair: Either they will have to be in a very abbreviated state or we will not meet with them. That's an informal meeting. It was mainly an informal Q and A situation, and again, this is not of anyone's doing here. This situation is what it is. Let's deal first with the first part of our meeting. We've had opening statements.

Mr. Ayoub, I think we have about three minutes left on your intervention, and then we'll just continue on until we dispense with the first round.

Go ahead, please.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Ramez Ayoub: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Thank you, everyone.

Actually, I would like to know what are the potential benefits of this change. That is what I wanted you to insist a little more on, to demonstrate to us which potential benefits will follow this implementation.

Mr. Patrick Borbey: With the new system we would like to see implemented in the years to come, candidates would have a much more intuitive and natural experience. It could be comparable to what is being done in major companies elsewhere.

Currently, application forms are very long, and applicants need to answer a number of questions. It is very complicated. Applicants must submit one application per desired position. We would like to make it possible for applicants to submit the requested information and subsequently have their applications considered for a number of positions. This information would be updated. Even if they do not succeed in being hired for one position, their applications could still be considered for another one, without having to go through the process again.

Furthermore, this would give hiring managers more options during the staffing process, because they would have access to a far more modern and efficient system.

These are a few of the benefits. We could also make sure that this system is accessible from coast to coast, and that it meets the highest accessibility standards. That would allow us to continue to improve the diversity of our staff.

● (1205)

Mr. Ramez Ayoub: Okay. Thank you.

[*English*]

I'm done with the questions.

The Chair: You have about a minute and a half left.

Mr. Ramez Ayoub: Do you want a minute?

Ms. Yasmin Ratansi (Don Valley East, Lib.): I have a quick question for Ms. Fox.

The mandate of the Transportation Safety Board is to ensure the safety of passengers etc. In October 2016 there was a tragic event in which the former premier of Alberta died. When they climbed into the plane, none of them knew that the pilot was not well trained to fly at night, and the company that was flying those planes was not reviewed for safety purposes.

There was a recommendation. Do you know what they have done with the recommendation? They recommended, number one, auditing companies that fly small planes. They also recommended that a black box be mandatory, because nobody had a black box, and none of these are required to have black boxes. Could you tell me a little about what's been happening since that?

Ms. Kathleen Fox: Previous investigations done by the Transportation Safety Board looked at the question of safety oversight, safety management on the part of operators, and safety oversight on the part of Transport Canada. In particular that came out of our investigation into an Ornge air ambulance helicopter crash back in 2013. Transport Canada as the regulator has advised the Transportation Safety Board in response to those recommendations that they are still not ready to move forward with requiring all operators to have safety management systems. With respect to oversight, they are definitely amending and updating their surveillance program to have a better combination of inspections for compliance, and audits or assessments of an operator's ability to manage safety.

In the case of the Kelowna accident, in the report we issued last week, we indicated that Transport Canada had not inspected that operator at any time since the operator came into business in 2008—and this was a business aviation operator not a commercial operator—and therefore they were not aware of some of the safety deficiencies in that operation. We issued two things. One was a recommendation to require on-board recorders for business aircraft as well as commercial, and the other was a concern with respect to Transport Canada's oversight of business aviation operators.

Ms. Yasmin Ratansi: I'd love to have that information. There's no training yet, and these pilots fly in the same airspace as the commercial ones, so we'd like to have some more information from them.

The Chair: I'm sure that Ms. Fox would be able to supply any and all information that she thinks would be helpful to this committee on that issue.

On a personal note, I know I speak for some of my colleagues as well, Jim Prentice, who died in that crash, was a very good friend to many of us. Yes, any answers and suggestions that could prevent a tragedy like this from happening again would be very well received.

Mr. McCauley, for seven minutes.

Mr. Kelly McCauley: Welcome back, Ms. Fox.

I want to follow up a bit on Ms. Ratansi's comments. You had commented that Transport Canada had not inspected that company. You note at page 5 of your departmental plan that currently the greatest challenges are in the aviation mode. You further state on page 10 that the percentage of safety advisories on which safety actions were taken is at 50%.

This is not a reflection of your department. It seems a reflection of Transport Canada not fulfilling perhaps some safety requirements for rail, aviation, and pipeline.

You mentioned the last time you were before us that Transport Canada had left quite a few items on your watch-list outstanding for years. It doesn't seem to be getting that much better. Could you expand on some of the issues you talked about when you say that currently the greatest challenges are in the aviation mode?

Ms. Kathleen Fox: That reference is particular to the issue of our outstanding recommendations. The board has issued almost 600 recommendations since we were created in 1990. The Minister of Transport, when the recommendations are directed to that department, has 90 days to respond. The department always responds.

We assess the response of the department in terms of whether it's going to address the deficiency we've identified, and we assess it until it fully addresses the issue, so we have a number of outstanding recommendations.

Most of the outstanding ones are in the aviation mode, and we did put that issue on our watch-list in 2016 to identify slow progress in addressing our recommendations. Since then, we have seen some significant progress, and we will be announcing in our annual report the progress that's been made on addressing those outstanding recommendations, particularly in aviation.

● (1210)

Mr. Kelly McCauley: On the issue with Mr. Prentice's plane not being inspected, how does something like that happen? Are there possibly, potentially, many other business aviation companies out there that haven't been inspected?

You mentioned Transport Canada had let it go many years, or never even once inspected this company to make sure it was compliant. Are we at risk that there are many others? Do you have confidence Transport Canada is going to follow up with your recommendations on this particular incident?

Ms. Kathleen Fox: Transport Canada had delegated the responsibility for oversight of the business aviation sector to an industry association back in 2003. Following an investigation that the TSB conducted, and recommendations we made in 2009, Transport Canada decided to take back responsibility for oversight of the business aviation sector.

That was implemented starting in about 2012. Transport Canada was conducting some audit, some inspections of business aviation operators, but this particular operator had not received any such inspections since the time it was created, or it went into operation.

Furthermore, Transport Canada suspended planned surveillance of business aviation operators in 2016, just prior to this accident, and it recently announced that it is reinstating planned surveillance of the business aviation sector going forward in 2018.

Mr. Kelly McCauley: I'm sorry, was it suspended in 2016?

Ms. Kathleen Fox: Transport Canada suspended planned surveillance, in other words, pre-announced inspections. It would respond based on risk indicators, including incidents and accidents, and it would conduct follow-up inspections or audits following that.

Since then, most recently in March, Transport Canada briefed the Transportation Safety Board that it is reinstating planned surveillance, in other words, pre-announced surveillance, in addition to reactive surveillance of the business aviation sector.

Mr. Kelly McCauley: One of the criticisms I've heard from investigators is that when we do these pre-announced inspections, it gives the companies time to perhaps sweep a few things under the carpet, or to put lipstick on a pig, for lack of better words, for the inspections.

Do you have any comment on that, about giving companies advanced warning, "Hey, we're coming to inspect you for safety or compliance"?

Ms. Kathleen Fox: You need a combination of both, announced and unannounced, and Transport Canada has, in the past, done both. We're talking about proactive surveillance, going in and doing an inspection and audit of the company's systems, its compliance with regulations and ability to manage safety, as opposed to reactively, after an incident or an accident, when it may be too late.

Mr. Kelly McCauley: How many companies do you think could be out there similar to the one involved in the Kelowna crash that have not been inspected?

Ms. Kathleen Fox: We don't have that level of detail. Transport Canada would be in a better position to respond. We know that there are between 600 and 700 business aviation registered operators, and Transport Canada has indicated that they intend to start with proactive, planned surveillance of those companies this year, but I don't have the exact number as to how many they're planning to do.

Mr. Kelly McCauley: On your watch-list for aviation, rail, and pipelines, what are your biggest concerns? A lot of items on the watch-list have been ignored or left outstanding for a long time. What are your biggest concerns?

Ms. Kathleen Fox: Each item on the watch-list is supported by our investigations' outstanding recommendations. Since we initiated the watch-list in 2010, a number of issues in rail, in marine, and in air have been removed from the watch-list as action has been taken. Other new issues have emerged and have been added, so we currently have three issues in air, one in marine, four in rail, and then two multimodal issues that we are working on.

Mr. Kelly McCauley: You mentioned, I think, in the report and previously when you've been in front of us that some of these watch-list items have been long outstanding. You mentioned three rail, I think, and four air. Are any of these outstanding, or are these all brand new ones that have popped up?

Ms. Kathleen Fox: On rail, there are four watch-list issues. Some of them are related to the Lac-Mégantic investigation, so they came on the watch-list in 2014 or 2016. Following signal indications has been on the watch-list since 2012. Some of the air ones have been on longer, since 2010, such as the risk of collision on the ground and the risk of runway overrun. These are not easy issues to solve. If they had been, they would have been solved a long time ago, so we are working both with Transport Canada and with industry to try to provide that compelling argument for change so that action will be taken.

● (1215)

Mr. Kelly McCauley: What do you think the biggest roadblock is? You say you work with Transport Canada and industry. Risk for collision on the ground—

The Chair: Mr. McCauley, I think we're going to have to cut it off there. Maybe one of your colleagues will pick up on the follow-up questions, but we'll have to move on to Mr. Blaikie for seven minutes, please.

Mr. Daniel Blaikie (Elmwood—Transcona, NDP): Thank you very much to all of the witnesses for coming. My questions are going to be focused predominantly on the Transportation Safety Board.

In particular, I want to address the issue of crew fatigue in rail. It's something that has come to my attention a lot. I represent a constituency with the main shops of the CN, and I know a lot of folks who operate trains. They're all concerned about the level of fatigue that exists for them and for their colleagues, particularly in light of some of what they're transporting through Canadian communities. They know they're doing it really tired or, in some cases, are asleep as they're moving these trains through communities, and they regularly report on this. I've been copied on some of that. I have reports from between February 5 and February 23 of 81 CN crews working in excess of 12 hours and up to 13 hours, and 43 crews working in excess of 13 hours, up to sometimes 30 hours, and that's just in a three-week window.

I'm wondering where, on the scale of priorities, crew fatigue is for the Transportation Safety Board and how much of your program activity you foresee being dedicated to crew fatigue in the upcoming year.

Ms. Kathleen Fox: First of all, Transport Canada, as the regulator, does have regulations with respect to fatigue in a number of modes and certainly in rail and air. From the point of view of the Transportation Safety Board, we always look to see if fatigue may have been a factor in any mode of transport we investigate. When we find it, and when we determine that it did have an impact on crew performance, then we cite it as a finding in our report, either as a causal or as a risk finding.

With respect to crew fatigue in the rail industry, in 2016 when we issued our current watch-list, we did identify crew fatigue in the rail industry as a watch-list issue. We highlighted a number of investigations where we'd reported it as a causal factor, a risk factor, and we are looking to see that Transport Canada work with the railway industry to require fatigue management plans for the railway industry to mitigate the risk of fatigue.

Mr. Daniel Blaikie: To the extent that this is a persistent issue, do you think that's, in part, because the TSB doesn't have the power to make binding recommendations?

Ms. Kathleen Fox: We don't have the power to make binding recommendations. We do make a compelling argument using data from our investigations and our recommendations to convince people of the need for change. This is the model that's been used in all developed countries, including the United States, Australia, New Zealand, and the U.K. We feel it's the best model, having an independent agency that points out safety deficiencies and makes recommendations with a requirement from the regulator and industry to respond to how they're going to address those recommendations. This is certainly something, as part of our outreach activity with industry and other stakeholders, where we have been communicating and conveying the risks associated with fatigue in the rail industry.

Mr. Daniel Blaikie: To your knowledge, is Transport Canada doing anything in terms of imposing penalties on railways if their fatigue management is deficient? Not just on paper; that's part of the debate too, that railways can have a good fatigue management policy on paper. Are you of the opinion that Transport Canada is digging into the details enough to know whether those policies are being followed and is then following up with appropriate consequences for railways if they're not?

Ms. Kathleen Fox: I know that the railway industry is under the safety management system regulations and that they can be, under any regulations, subject to enforcement action by Transport Canada. Transport Canada is in a better position than we are to answer you on what they're doing specifically in terms of issuing fines or notices to the railways.

In addition to our own investigations, we do receive confidential safety reports from operators on fatigue issues related to the railway. We transmit those to Transport Canada, and usually they do follow up with us in terms of what action they've taken.

Mr. Daniel Blaikie: On the question of voice and video recording on trains—this is an item in Bill C-49—the government is proposing to treat the railway industry differently from the aviation industry. My understanding is that on planes, while you have recording devices, the information is made available to the Transportation Safety Board in the event they're investigating, but the information is not made available willy-nilly, if you will, to the companies.

In your view, is there a reason for treating rail differently from the aviation industry with respect to access to the recorded data that's granted to companies?

● (1220)

Ms. Kathleen Fox: First of all, we've been long-standing vocal about requiring recorders on board all modes of transportation to help us in our investigations, but we also believe firmly that those recordings can be very useful to operators in order to investigate incidents and accidents that we don't investigate and also for proactive safety management purposes—provided they remain protected, which they will, under our act, and provided the appropriate safeguards are embedded in regulations.

It's part of Bill C-49 because it's part of the overall requirement for voice and video recorders. It helps provide a greater safety benefit to the operators if they can have access to this information. In the long term, it remains to be seen whether that will be expanded to other modes. It's certainly something that the International Civil Aviation Organization is looking at for recorders on airplanes, about potentially expanding that use to operators.

Mr. Daniel Blaikie: For the moment, then, what's conceived for the rail industry in Bill C-49 is different from what obtains...in the airline industry.

Ms. Kathleen Fox: It would be in terms of...if it's passed. Depending on what provisions are passed, it could expand the use to railway companies under Transport Canada. Again, the voice recordings would remain privileged under our act, and would be subject to very strict use under the regulations as well as the provision for enforcement if they are misused.

Mr. Daniel Blaikie: Thank you very much.

The Chair: Thank you.

Madam Mendès, you have seven minutes, please.

Mrs. Alexandra Mendès (Brossard—Saint-Lambert, Lib.): Good afternoon, everyone.

I have one question for TSB. It's on Lac-Mégantic. You might have guessed it would be of interest to me, coming from Quebec.

When you came to the committee in November 2017, you told the committee that you had made five recommendations as a result of the Lac-Mégantic investigation. Apparently, only one of those had been addressed fully by the time you came here in November 2017.

I don't know if it's possible, but could you give us an update on the progress of those recommendations since and on where we're at, in May of 2018, with the recommendations on Lac-Mégantic?

Ms. Kathleen Fox: Every year we conduct an annual reassessment where we ask Transport Canada to provide us with an update on what actions they've taken.

In the case of the five Lac-Mégantic recommendations, one had gone fully satisfactory very early, within months after the accident.

Recently, the one relating to route planning and risk analysis was assessed as fully satisfactory. That information is hot off the press. It hasn't been released publicly yet.

The other recommendations are at various stages of implementation. The one relating to tank cars is definitely progressing. The minister last year announced a faster withdrawal of some of the older legacy tank cars that were involved in Lac-Mégantic. That is progressing.

With respect to Transport Canada's oversight of safety management systems, we've definitely seen some good progress there in terms of how they're overseeing the railway industry. We still have one, with respect to the prevention of runaway equipment, that is only satisfactory in part. We recently issued a concern about that. More physical defences need to be put in place to prevent uncontrolled movements on railways tracks.

Overall, some progress has been made since November, and we will be able to close one additional one of the Lac-Mé¿..ntic recommendations.

Mrs. Alexandra Mendès: Thank you very much.

Why hasn't the runaway equipment been addressed more vigorously? It seems to me it's quite pressing.

Ms. Kathleen Fox: Transport Canada has implemented a number of new rules since Lac-Mégantic to require better securement of trains and rolling stock on track but we did see an increase in the number of uncontrolled movements so we believe that while those rules are a good step in the right direction, they're not enough to reduce the risk of an uncontrolled movement.

Most of them take place in yards where the risk is very low, but we still are concerned that the risk is there, particularly if these cars or trains get out on the main track.

● (1225)

Mrs. Alexandra Mendès: And particularly if staff and employees are around. That could be extremely dangerous for them in going about their workplace. It seems to be a very urgent thing to address.

Ms. Kathleen Fox: Again, steps have been taken but because we have seen an increase in the last year in the number of uncontrolled movements, we have a concern that the steps that have been taken so far may not be adequate and more needs to be done, particularly with respect to physical defences to prevent cars from uncontrolled moving.

Mrs. Alexandra Mendès: Thank you. I don't want to take too much longer.

Another issue caught my attention in the report prepared by our analysts, and it's the recruitment and development of new investigators, as a significant portion of your staff is retiring. How do you plan to replace them as they retire, and what kind of training is offered to them once they are hired?

Ms. Kathleen Fox: I'll ask Mr. Laporte to answer the question.

Mr. Jean Laporte (Chief Operating Officer, Canadian Transportation Accident Investigation and Safety Board): We typically hire people who are very experienced in the industry. It's normal to have a high turnover rate because we don't hire new recruits out of university, we hire people with 25, 30 years of experience so they stay with us for five, 10 years, and then they retire. That's normal.

We are using some of the different flexibilities available to us in staffing to create pools of pre-qualified candidates to ensure timely replacement. We're also looking at using some of the flexibilities to recruit people from within the various employment equity groups. We have different ways to bring in people, and we've been successful in filling our positions recently. We haven't had too much difficulty competing with other employers for quality talent.

In terms of training, we are revamping our own in-house developmental programs. Essentially we bring in experienced people who have knowledge of aviation, marine, pipelines, railways, and we train them to become investigators. We are currently making major investments in modernizing, revamping our training programs. Typically people go through a two-year training period, classroom training, on-the-job training, until they become fully qualified investigators.

Mrs. Alexandra Mendès: I imagine they're accompanying other inspectors while they're being trained.

Mr. Jean Laporte: That's right. There's on-the-job coaching, and so on.

Mrs. Alexandra Mendès: I imagine that part of your full budget is planned for this, for the training of new staff. I'm a bit curious to see the decrease in appropriations that you've asked for in these main estimates. Do you have an explanation?

Mr. Jean Laporte: There is no decrease in our appropriations. Essentially our appropriations have been stable for the last few years. As Madam Fox indicated in her opening remarks, we are receiving $800,000 more in salary dollars for this year to cover collective bargaining costs. Our budget has been stable although we have acknowledged in our departmental plan that we are facing some resource pressures, some challenges.

Mrs. Alexandra Mendès: If I may interrupt you for two seconds, that's my concern. You do identify challenges but there is a $2.6 million decrease compared to 2017-18.

The Chair: If you can give a very brief answer, then we'll have to move on.

Mr. Jean Laporte: If you look at the main estimates, the perceived decrease you see there is that the numbers for the previous year include supplementary estimates so extra money was provided in the year for the carry-forward of the previous year's lapse as well, as we requested in supplementary estimates a one-time adjustment to cover retroactive costs of salaries last year.

If you subtract that from the previous year's numbers, the budget has been relatively flat for quite a few years. We are having discussions with central agencies about incremental funding and those discussions are positive at this point and we're hoping to get some answers, some decisions, from the government shortly.

● (1230)

Mrs. Alexandra Mendès: We'll be seeing you for the supplementaries. Thank you.

The Chair: We'll have to cut it off there. Thank you very much, all of you, for being here. Once again, unfortunately, because of the fire alarms, we had an abbreviated question and answer period. I do thank you for your participation. Your input has been very helpful.

We will suspend, colleagues, for just a couple of minutes while we ask the French delegation to approach the table, and we'll have a brief opportunity to have an informal discussion with them.

[Proceedings continue in camera]

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